

LECTURES ON POETRY, BY T. CAMPBELL.

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LECTURE I. PART 2.

IN concluding the former part of this Lecture, I remarked, that the term Poetry, in its extensive and philosophical meaning, applies to prose fictions, when they delight the imagination. But I endeavoured to discriminate the delight of the imagination, from that mere curiosity in the stir of existence, the gratification of which is the object of the great mass of novels. Fancied events and characters are not poetry, unless they present conceptions of Nature heightened above common-place, skilfully selected and originally combined. It is true, that fiction makes an approach to poetry, the moment that it represents scenes and incidents, and characters, with a story or drama possessing harmony of design; but the approach will be very distant, if a spirit be not also infused into the imitation of life, that shall make it seem like a magic vision of the original. The imagination cannot be said to be exercised, unless we are transported beyond reality.

I have also said, that Comedy, though it often conveniently dispenses with verse, is allied to poetry in its nature. There is no doubt that our comic emotions are less eminently poetical than those of our serious sensibility, and that the sense of ridicule rather humbles, than flatters, the pride of humanity. But ridicule is nevertheless a boldly fanciful power, and one that transports us out of all mediocrity of sensation. Nor is it unconnected with our perceptions of moral truth. The exaggerating medium through which it exhibits human follies, may not be compared, indeed, to the magnifying telescope, that makes us acquainted with the glories of heaven, but to the microscope, that amuses us with the plumage and panoply of the half-visible tribes of creation. It detects all the fluttering vanities in "*that little busy world, the heart of man.*" It possesses and carries us away in a torrent of gay enthusiasm. A total insensibility to the comic, though not a proof, is rather a suspicious symptom of the other imaginative faculties being obtuse. And there have been more absurd distinctions made by theorists, than that of Lucian's philosopher, when he discriminates man from ass by his risibility—*ως ἀνθρωπος μεν γέλαστικον, ουος δε σι γέλαστικον.*"*

* *Lucian's Bisus Πραστις.*

The consummate characters of comedy are great ideal conceptions, master-pieces of imagination, though their familiar mirth may make them seem our humble acquaintances. It is true that we hear, every day, of particular persons having been the real originals exactly delineated by the most humorous authors. But in proportion to the genius of such moral painters, we may venture to deny the possibility of their having copied individual portraits. Some eccentric person may have been generally in the mind of a writer at the time of his sketching an exquisite character, but only as a rallying point to the innumerable original traits of his imagination. Who would ask where Shakspeare found his Falstaff, except in the mine of his own invention ?

At the same time, whilst the abstracting and combining powers of the imagination have entered into the invention of such characters, they appear to be individuals. Consummate art makes us forget that they have been invented, and gives them the free and familiar air of reality. The bulk of fiction-writers, unable to create imaginary beings of this description, take a shorter road towards individuality, by adopting individuals ready-made ; and copy or caricature human nature, as it has the misfortune to fall in their way. Their readers feel some difference of effect, but are not always quite clear as to the cause of their being better pleased with ideal than accidental imitation. They have been assured of some village, or town, or family, where the most ideal comic characters, to a certainty, lived, long before and after they were so kind as to visit the brain of the genius that pourtrayed them ; and mistaking hints for prototypes, they associate the idea of lively character-painting with the copying of a live man. The commonest novel shews them some feigned name, under which there is no more of human nature described, than what exactly tallies with the slander or ridicule attached to the neighbour whose intended likeness they recognise ; and they are apt to imagine, that Le Sage and Cervantes had recourse to the same expedients.

We are rarely presented, in verse, with the same garrulous common-place fiction as in prose. The bad novelist is familiarly, the bad poet is loftily, tiresome. And, is indifferent verse, it may then be asked, more tolerable than the mediocrity of prose ? No, it is a great deal worse. This circumstance, however, is an indirect argument in favour of verse. We must be pleased with it highly, or not at all. It is a noble instrument, on which imperfect execution is insupportable. The prose describer of life may, without disappointing us, abstain from any attempt to raise us above the ordinary sensations of life ; and he, for the most part, only wearies us by its insipid dialogues. But the bad versifier disgusts us by adopting the token of an enthusiasm

which he either feels not, or cannot express, and by giving the emphasis of numbers to thoughts destitute of originality. The deepest bathos of expression is therefore to be found in verse, and for the same reason also its highest beauty.

In addition to harmony, the poet gives his language a degree of selection and refinement, which is not required in any species of composition, the primary object of which is not to delight the imagination. Cowper himself, who, with all the delicacy of his genius, dreaded the harmony of verse interfering with his inspiration, in the same manner as the old Presbyterians feared that correct psalmody might disturb their devotions, has nevertheless advised poets to use “*words exquisitely chosen.*” We shall, no doubt, misapply the principle of selection to poetry, if we suppose that there is a certain privileged class of words which are at all times to be exclusively chosen by the composer, and another class which he is bound, under every circumstance, to reject. The whole world of words ought to be at his command. But it is desirable that poetical expression should bring the least possible interference of mean or discordant associations; and in proportion as language aims at inspiring beautiful or elevated trains of thought, the attention of the mind is more and more awakened to the effect of words, and to the minutest collateral hints which they give to the associating faculty. In the intercourse of life, men’s minds, quickened by passions and interests, acquire a considerable promptitude in choosing expressions which unite perspicuity to the understanding, with power and delicacy in touching or sparing our associations. And hence the poet should watch the utterance of individuals in their critical and impassioned moments. But he must not imitate the unpurified and accidental style of their discourse; for they have neither time, taste, nor circumstances, to make that style consistent with a high tone of the imagination*. The objects of Nature are assembled in poetry with ideal beauty; and in like manner, its language has a beauty beyond contingent reality. Still, an ideally beautified diction may be adapted to the lowest as well as the highest characters of existence. The resemblance of life is not lost in its ameliorated diction; nor are the peasants of † Home and Sophocles less natural, when they speak so as not to lower the tone of tragedy, than if they suggested the grossest ideas of clownish rusticity. In imagination, we view existence with a pure and

* Dionysius, of Halicarnassus, shews us how hostile the opinion of ancient criticism was to mean or trivial expression in poetry. Simplicity, however, is not to be confounded with that colloquial trivialness which the ancients meant by the term *λογοειδεια*. Dionysius expressly ranks this among the faults of poetic language, when he says, *Μηδεις δε φταλαμβανεται με δηγοειν οτι κακια ποιησας η λογοειδεια δοκει τις ειραι.*

† *Viz.* in the tragedies of Douglas and Oedipus Tyrannus.

unlimited sympathy, over which those accidental circumstances which damp our enthusiasm in the real world, have no controul. Emancipated, in the pure region of poetry, from those checks on the impulses to feeling which distract us in real life, we give ourselves up to emotions that exhaust expression without being felt to exhaust themselves. They appear as if they justified our interminable enjoyment of them, and as if they were a light raying from our being upon infinity. But this is not our ordinary impression of life: its discourse is therefore, for the most part, adapted to a very moderated state of feeling, and its cast of phraseology is often constructed so as rather to conceal passion, than to convey it. It is marked by forms of courtesy and ceremony, by general expressions, and by many colloquial familiarities, which, if introduced into the language of imagination, could be by no effort of the mind dissociated from vulgar ideas. Even when men's thoughts are put into studied compositions which treat of the higher utilities of life, their general style will still be, in some degree, different from that of the poet; for, though they deal, like him, with moral truth, they deal with it in a more logical and literal manner. At times such prose writers will unquestionably be poetical, as all eloquence is allied to poetry; but they must cease to be closely argumentative, or instructive, in sober facts, if the character of their diction be uniformly imaginative. The only conceivable case in which a writer's general object in composition will justify such selected and supported beauty of diction as the poet's, is when he uniformly addresses the imagination in unmeasured language. In such a work, the style will undoubtedly approach very near to that of poetry. And yet I cannot help imagining, that when measure is dropped, the character of composition will always naturally decline into a less exquisite choice of expression, than when the composer's mind teems with thoughts that "*voluntarily move harmonious numbers**. For, when expression flows within the clear limits of harmony, its increased emphasis to the ear, and distinctness to the memory and conception, must expose the beauty and propriety of every word and phrase in a more trying light to our associations, than if we met them in unmeasured language. And there is many a clause which we should pass over quietly in a prose sentence, even addressed to the imagination, which would strike us as redundant, or insipid, in the form of metre.

Accordingly, in all languages, the character of measured and unmeasured composition has been different, both in boldness and refinement of expression. Peculiar licences have been granted to the former, partly owing to the vehemence of feeling which we associate with the flow of numbers, and partly owing to the deeper permanence of verse in our memory, rendering slight departures

* Milton.

from the ordinary structure of speech less obscure than they would be in prose. In speaking of such peculiarities of poetical diction, no one will dispute that they are liable to constant and extreme abuse in the hands of unskilful employers. But, because a thousand unmeaning compound epithets have been used by bad poets, shall we condemn such phrases as the *ροδοδακτυλος* 'Ηως of Homer, or the *δελλοποδων ιππων* of Pindar? Or can it be denied such expressions as the "rosy-fingered morning," and the "wind-footed steeds," are wholly above the tenor of prose? The pages of Milton and Shakspeare teem with so many similar phrases, that it is unnecessary to quote them.

From this opinion, that poetry has a right to unprosaic graces, it by no means follows that her right to them is at all times to be equally exercised. We shall meet with agreeable sentences in the best poets, as humble in diction as our ordinary discourse. But we are not on this account to identify the simplicity of poetry with that of common conversation, nor impugn her privilege of rising above it, because she can gracefully descend to its level. The ordinary language of life abounds in a greater proportion of general terms, than of images embodied to the fancy. But in poetry we wish nature to be not abstractedly, but picturesquely, intelligible. For the beauty of the universe is like that of a living being to the poet's eye. At the same time, whilst his sympathy attributes mind to the material world, his fancy, impatient of cold and general terms, clothes his own mental workings in the symbols of material images. Thus figurative language is doubly natural to poetry, from the disposition of enthusiasm to ascribe consciousness to the surrounding creation, and from its wish to convey thoughts in the most impressive and palpable signs. The necessity of man, it is true, probably more than his passions, gave a high degree of figurativeness to his early speech. But this is one of the characteristics which language loses, to a considerable degree, in the progress of its cultivation. Not only philosophy multiplies abstract terms, but words of figurative etymology come to be applied, without reference to their fanciful origin, which is forgot in their continued use, as the stamp of coins is effaced by long circulation.*

But poetry claims a right to revive, at will, the primitive figurativeness of human speech, as if conscious of her primogeniture among the arts of language. At the same time the poet also avails himself of all the richness and refinement, and even philosophical accuracy, which speech acquires by cultivation. His enthusiasm will naturally prompt him to body forth, in sensible images, many thoughts, which dispassionate language would con-

*. Thus the word daisy is a thousand times pronounced without our adverting to the beauty of its name, so easily traced in etymology, *viz.* the eye of day.

vey in general terms. But his taste will also inform him, that diction may have too much, as well as too little imagery ; and that the relief of plain and even abstract expression may have its place as usefully in poetry, as shade in painting. The attainment of that style, in which profound intellectual conceptions harmonize with the hues of fancy, is a gift which genius may be said to reach peculiarly by its own industry ; and is frequently one of the latest fruits of a poet's experience. His quick sympathies with nature belong to him in spite of himself, and his mind is led spontaneously into deep reflections on life by the same involuntary sensibilities. But, in conveying them to others, he has the fresh task of raising their minds, by an instantaneous medium of communication, to understand nature with his own perceptions and feelings, which are above their usual habits of thought. When I justify the poet's attention to language, I wish not to be understood to mean elaborate zeal for trivial artifices, but the anxiety of genius to give its heart-felt observations of nature their utmost force and felicity of expression. Viewed in this light, the study of style is not searching for the means to weaken genius, but to guide and prevent exhaustion of its strength, and to save every portion of its inspired meaning from being lost to us by the medium of communication. There is danger, no doubt, in too strongly enforcing all general positions. That happy diction which makes us feel, in the perusal of it, that nothing could be added, and nothing taken away—who shall deny that it may sometimes present itself to the composer's mind in the very first heat of composition, and that it may afterwards elude all the anxiety of his research? It is equally true, that solicitude may produce affected and artificial phraseology, instead of that perfection of art in which Nature appears to speak with unpremeditated felicity, however deeply her best expression may have been studied. But let it not be forgot, that the art and the artificialness of poetry are different things, and that the most exquisite simplicity of poetical language is often produced by the deepest study. Upon the whole, shall we recommend the study, or the neglect of diction, to the poet, supposing him to possess original powers? Shakspeare will probably come to his recollection, who is said to have never blotted a line. Not on paper perhaps, but who can assure us that he may not have blotted thousands on the tablet of his imagination? A mind of such electric rapidity might study as much in ten minutes, as another in as many hours. A man, however, ought to be tolerably well assured that he is another Shakspeare, before he assumes this liberty. Were we to follow the inference that is sometimes drawn from mere tradition respecting Shakspeare, we might imagine that negligence is the parent of felicity in poetry. But Tasso, Ariosto, Dante, Virgil, Euripides, and

Milton, did not think so. And who shall despise that solicitous cultivation of diction, which they avowed and fervidly practised? Ariosto, the darling poet of imagination, it is true, carried his industry, in this respect, too far; for he shortened his days by toiling at the correction of his compositions. Virgil, without the eloquence which he thus attained, might have failed to perpetuate Roman glory; and Camoëns would not have otherwise given his country a rank among poetical nations—for the plan of the Lusiad is by no means admirable. Chaucer, for want of style, left the English language unfixed and barbarous for an hundred and fifty years after his death. Had the diction of Dante been no better, the history of Italian literature would have also been postponed. But the *Divina Commedia* is popular in Italy, whilst Chaucer's works are scarcely intelligible in England; for Dante's poetry gave a bulwark to his native speech against the ravages of time.

I am aware that, if I professed to offer an entire treatise on Poetry, it would be proper for me to enter on the classification of its different kinds—such as the Narrative, Dramatic, Lyrical, &c. But, consistently with the plan of the course which I have sketched out, I could appropriate only one Lecture to the treatment of poetical subjects in an abstract point of view; and within the bounds of a single discourse, I could not hope to include a satisfactory discussion of the character which belongs to those different classes of poetry. I pass, therefore, to another topic, which I thought might be more easily comprehended within my limits. This is, the connexion of poetry with human improvement—the influence which the poet's art receives from civilization, and the moral utility which it renders back to society.

The first branch of the subject may be treated in the shape of a speculative question, How far the continued progress of knowledge and philosophy is likely to affect the future character of poetry, and its influence over the human mind? The chief objection to such an inquiry, which I can anticipate, is, the undefined meaning which we attach to the idea of future human civilization. That objection, however, may be greatly obviated, if we only assume that degree of intellectual progress to be probable, in the future history of mankind, which is justified by the experience of their past improvement. We know that man may be too barbarous to be capable of relishing the arts of imagination—we know that a little civilization is sufficient to awaken his poetical powers—we know that, in a long lapse of ages, he has improved in every thing more than in poetry—and there are circumstances, accompanying the general diffusion of knowledge, which will at least warrant the statement of a question, Whether they are propitious, or not, to the production and enjoyment of poetry?

I am not a convert to the doctrine of those, who conceive the cultivation of Poetry, and the other Fine Arts, to be only an intermediate stage, in the advancement of the human mind, from ignorance and barbarism, to the utmost intellectual ripeness of which society at large is susceptible. But I will, nevertheless, attempt to state, with anxious justice, whatever seems to me capable of being alleged in favour of that supposition. To whatever conclusion we may be led, who would not fervidly wish the assumed probability to be true, when we speak of the moral improveableness of human nature? It is no Utopian construction of this doctrine to suppose, that the species, like an individual, must grow, collectively, better acquainted with their own interests, by age and experience, "whilst day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge." We must suppose, that men will guard against relapses into darkness and superstition, in proportion as they feel the blessings of truth. The philosopher is the unquestioned guardian of this intellectual progress. But in the history of human improvement, the Poet's compositions, whilst they preceded all sober inquiry into moral and physical truth, appealed to passions that were interwoven with ignorance and credulity. Some civilization was necessary to call forth the art of Poetry; such as the human mind having recognised some vague religious feelings and the general laws of moral sympathy. It was also necessary that the aspect of society should possess some imposing artificial splendour, before it could be a fit subject for heroic narrative. But, when these circumstances had concurred, the birth of Poetry was complete. *Nescio quid majus nascitur Iliade?* There are more refined sentiments to be met with than in Homer's works; but there is no author more absolutely a poet.

The history of Art is very different from that of Science. The first imitators of Nature revelled in the new occupancy of the field; and they speedily attained an excellence which, if rivalled, has never been surpassed. The materials of description which Nature offered to succeeding poets, if not exhausted, were at least partially encroached upon. Meanwhile, the very love of novelty in the human breast, which has led on the arts towards improvement, has generally given them, after they have reached to a certain point of excellence, an opposite impulse towards decay. In science, on the contrary, the accumulation of facts produces the means of simplifying principles; and all knowledge that is gained, tends towards the acquisition of more, just as the iron that is dug from the mine, in return, facilitates the work of the miner. And this is the case, not only in the physical, but moral experience of men. Is it possible to shut our eyes on the fact, that prejudices, which the philo-

sophers of a late age durst not discountenance, have lost their hold even over the vulgar? But philosophy and science destroy not merely those noxious bigotries which deform the uncultivated human mind; they also strike at the root of many innocent, superstitious credulities, which naturally blossom into poetry. A philosophically religious view of the universe gives an awful unity to our conception of its first cause, which lays prostrate the powers of fancy. As the motions of Nature are traced, they are more and more found to be regulated by immutable laws, which, when ascribed to one Omnipotent Being, give the mind but little disposition to dream of fanciful and subordinate spiritual agencies, interfering with the operations of the world. The poet however has been indebted, for beautiful subjects, to these "*demi-puppets of divinity*;" and if they had not been once the objects of serious belief, they probably would not have found their way to his imagination. Whilst man was ignorant of the physical truth of Nature, there was an air of familiar and impassioned agency presented to his mind, in all her operations. Her changes appeared to him the actions of separate and even capricious beings, and not the effects of laws on unconscious matter. The eclipse and the sunshine, the calm and the conflict of the elements, their whispers, their storms, and their echoes, had all a voice, or a vision, to his superstitious heart. The very solitude and silence of the earth were haunted, to his imagination. The caverns of the ocean seemed to be built by the hands of giants or genii. The voices of spirits were heard from the waves, and fairies sported on the yellow sands, or in the moonlight forests. Till philosophy stepped forth, and disenchanted all this illusion, even to the vulgar eye. There is now no more credit for the dapper elves. The daylight of geography pursues the poet in the locality of his subjects, so that he has no *terra incognita* where his imaginary scenes may remain uncontradicted by the traveller. Every natural phenomenon too is reduced to cold unpoetical causes. Even the pillars of Fingal's cave are expounded, by the hard-hearted mineralogist, on principles of chemical fusion or crystallization. To pursue the same train of argument respecting the influence of philosophical knowledge on poetical fancy, it may be remarked, that although we may enjoy a superstitious mythology, without believing it, yet we like it better when it comes down to us from a superstitious age, than when it is got up to the imagination, like a phantasmagoria at noon-day, by the poet of enlightened times which have survived such credulities. Should an epic author, for instance, at this day, attempt to revive the machinery of the *Iliad*, he would not, probably, find its gods and goddesses produce a very lively illusion. Whereas, when a Poet transmits superstitions coeval with him-

self, he gives us a picture of past existence, fresh with sincerity, and fraught with authentic character, like the—

“ Prevailing Poet, whose undoubting mind
Believed the magic wonders which he sung.”

On these grounds, namely, that Poetry may be suspected to exhaust her own resources in presenting reiterated descriptions of Nature; that some of the fairest flowers of Poetry have been put forth under the morning light of civilization, whilst it might be said of lingering credulities, that they “ *shadowy set off the face of things;*” and that the human mind, when it learns soberly to contemplate existence, sees the powers of magic exorcised, and superstition part with her charms as well as her terrors—on these grounds, appears to me to be founded the only possibility of suspecting, that the tendency of continued civilization is to limit, rather than enlarge, the influence of Poetry on the human mind.

In stating these arguments, I have spoken of the progress of Poetry *seeming* to exhaust the materials which external nature offers as subjects of description to the poet. I use the expression “ *seeming*,” because there is an appearance of such a fact without the reality. Sensible writers seem to me to have at times treated poetical imitation so much in the light of a material process, as to forget the perpetual and spiritual novelty of which it is susceptible*. Madame de Stael, when speaking of the poet’s representation of the physical world, observes, “ that the portrait can go no farther than the resemblance.” In a certain sense, this remark is admissible, and, undoubtedly, the poet of a succeeding age cannot continually improve upon the imitations of nature made by an antecedent one, so as to render the resemblance of nature more and more striking and faithful; but still he may vary our impressions of existence by new and true likenesses. The objects of the universe are susceptible of varied combinations and associations with our moral feelings, to an extent which may almost be pronounced illimitable. When the poetical imitation of nature is compared, as by the eloquent authoress whom I have quoted, to the portrait of a single

* Madame de Stael has not absolutely argued the probability of Poetry decaying under the continued influence of philosophy; but she takes a view of the Poet’s art, which, if admitted, would lead to that conclusion: “ La Poésie proprement dite,” she says, “ est l’art de peindre par la parole tout ce que frappe nos regards. L’alliance des sentiments avec les sensations est déjà un premier pas vers la philosophie.” But the language which should paint only what strikes our senses in external nature, without alloying moral sentiment to physical observation, neither can be, nor ever has been called Poetry. In the Iliad itself, there is that first step towards philosophy, to which Madame de Stael alludes; not refined sentiments, but the strong and natural outlines of moral feeling which mark the poet’s knowledge of man. But when philosophy is thus transubstantiated into art, does Poetry end where the knowledge of human nature begins? As well might we say of a picture, in which the laws of perspective and human proportions were accurately observed, that it is not painting, but anatomy and optics.

person, the illustration will deceive us, if it be literally understood. The features of the external universe have diversities of aspect, produced by time, by nature, and by circumstances, to which there is nothing comparable in the changing appearances of a solitary individual. The range of objects which poetry may convey to our imaginations, can scarcely be said to be limited, but by the extent of human enjoyments. And if we add to the diversity of things themselves, the different lights of association, in which the same objects may be viewed, not capriciously, but justly, by different minds, we shall probably conceive that a world, inhabited by active, impassioned, and perishable beings, must for ever be an inexhaustible emporium of materials to the poet. We may be reminded, that poetry attained an early maturity and beauty, beyond which she has never actually advanced. This fact, however, only regards the excellence of her individual works. Her collective variety has increased with the progress of society; and at every new epoch of human improvement, literature has enriched her casket with fresh gems of immortal lustre.

The benefits which Poetry has received from splendid and imposing false mythologies, form a more important argument on the subject. It may be doubted, if the enlightened imagination of man may always be expected to dwell with the same complacency on poetical resources, borrowed from ignorance and credulity. And one can scarcely help suspecting, that in proportion as the general religion of society becomes purified from superstition, (an event which no friend to religion will regard as visionary,) the gradual oblivion into which old traditions and mythologies must necessarily fall, will probably affect the character of poetry with regard to the *speciosa miracula* of her fiction. But, supposing the human fancy ceased to converse with exploded mythologies, still the active principle of imagination must remain alive, and it will only change the objects of its visionary enjoyment. The arts may rise and fall, but the powers of the mind from which they spring cannot be extinguished in the constitution of man, without a metamorphosis of his nature, or rather a disease that would paralyse one half of his moral fabric. And can this be expected from civilization? No. There is an indestructible love of ideal happiness in the human breast. Whilst there is a star in heaven, man will look to it with a day-dream of brighter worlds. As long as a mortal and imperfect state fails to "accommodate the shews of things to the desires of the mind," the optimism of our hearts will fly from the accidents and imperfections, to the ideal beauty and harmony of nature; and this is but another word for poetry.

The faculty of imagination, as Dugald Stewart observes, "is " the great spring of human activity, and the principal source of

" human improvement. Destroy this faculty, and the condition " of man will be as stationary as that of the brutes." An art, or if that term be objectionable, a gift of language, which gratifies us by appealing to so important a principle in our nature, cannot but produce important effects, both on the character of society and of individuals. It is unnecessary to illustrate a remark so often inculcated by the most liberal-minded philosophers, that a quickened and cultivated enthusiasm for the objects of taste opens a field for the refined and redoubled enjoyment of existence. And as poetry is the most spiritual of all the pursuits of taste, and the least connected with the luxury of the external senses, it can be the least suspected of a tendency to enervate men's minds, whilst it cultivates their milder affections. At the same time, it has not escaped observation, that our imperfect natures are in this, as in every other instance, exposed to the danger of evil accompanying good. An imagination constantly absorbed in the ideal beauty and excellence of a world of fiction, may acquire a fastidiousness detrimental to useful pursuits, that must be followed, amidst the rough and dull realities of life. I cannot help thinking, however, that this fastidiousness is more likely to be the disease of a weak than of a strong imagination; and that the sympathy which enters fervidly into ideal scenes will throw itself, with proportioned energy, into actual concerns. At all events, those mental peculiarities which may arise from habitually conversing with imaginary objects, have little or nothing to do with the influence of poetry on society at large. They relate, if not exclusively, at least incomparably more to the poet himself than to his readers, whose minds may enjoy him sufficiently, with small risk of contracting the morbid habits ascribed to genius. The chance of poetry abstracting our sympathies so deeply into fiction, as to defraud society of one benevolent feeling that would be otherwise bestowed on real objects, can be a subject of apprehension to no man's serious thoughts. The danger, in fact, of the poet's command over our sensibilities, is not that it may transport them too far out of the real world, but that he may attach them too grossly to its enjoyments. And there can be no doubt that he possesses some power and responsibility in this respect, since, having access to the passions, he may, to a certain degree, pollute, as well as purify, those fountains of human action. The joyous spirit of poetry takes alarm and flight at the prospect of being subjected to the avowed purposes of utility and instruction. Her primary attraction is her delightfulness; and if any man should inform us that he opened a volume of the drama, or repaired to the theatre, for the sole sake of morality, we might reasonably suspect that his veracity was one part of his morals that stood in need of amendment. Nevertheless, moral utility may result from employments of the mind

which have pleasure for their object, in the same manner as bodily health may be promoted by agreeable exercises. It is of momentous consequence in the economy of life, that its hours of leisure should be rescued from listlessness, or corrosive humours, or sensual pursuits, and devoted to studies which, at least, engender no evil affections. How far the mass of novels answer this description, it is unnecessary for me to attempt determining. My opinion is, that if they increase the sum of human idleness, they mitigate its pernicious effects. But I have endeavoured to discriminate the dissipation of the mind, produced by common-place fiction, from its elevation and excitement by the true language of imagination. And if it be asked, what general security we possess, for the probability of the poet's talents being employed in supporting the interests of virtue, it may be answered, that the nature of Poetry itself forms a mighty strong-hold. Impurity is an anomalous mixture, in its character. In the same manner as the artist, in visible forms, regards all profligate hints to our associations as utterly foreign to the spirit of art; in like manner, the poet finds no sentiments fitted for the universal admiration of mankind, but those which can be delivered unblushingly from age to age. Hence the poets of barbarous times were the prophets of future civilization; and those of enlightened ages still impel our imaginations forward into conceptions of ideal virtue and happiness, that make us love to suppose the essence of our being to be immortal. It is therefore but a faint eulogium on poetry to say, that it only furnishes an innocent amusement, to fledge the lagging hours of existence. Its effects are incalculably more beneficent. Besides supplying records of human manners, in some respects more faithful than those of history itself, it upholds an image of existence that heightens our enjoyment of all the charms of external nature, and that deepens our sympathies with whatever is amiable, or interesting, or venerable, in human character. We cannot alter one trait of our bodily forms; but the spiritual impressions made on the mind will elevate and amend the mind itself. And the spirits that would devote themselves to be the heroes and benefactors of mankind, are not likely to be less cherished by the philosophy that restrains their passions, than by the poetry that touches their imaginations with humane and generous sentiments.

End of the First Lecture.
